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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the content, techniques, and benefits of a life history course, which was designed to extend the traditional goal of psychological development through autobiography into a spiritual context. The three major components of the course are described. The format of the lectures is presented, focusing on concepts, ideas, and tools used in spiritual understanding and autobiography, e.g., life-span developmental psychology, theories of moral and spiritual development, and theories of the self. Weekly writing assignments, which integrate the various themes of life (family, health, work, money, death, sexual development, moral development) with spiritual development, are described, along with the small group discussions held at the end of each class to share insights gained through the written assignments. The use and benefits of three special techniques, i.e., open ended statements, natural world metaphors, and sensitizing questions, are discussed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the benefits of the course to its participants and suggestions for adapting the techniques to other settings and populations. (BL)

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SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING THROUGH LIFE HISTORIES

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SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING THROUGH LIFE HISTORIES

by B.J. Hateley

At this year's American Psychological Association meeting, it was noted by a number of religious psychologists that "their secular colleagues' longstanding disdain for spiritual matters is slowly beginning to melt."[1]

"Merton Strommen, recipient of the William James award this year said, 'The irony is (that) though most Americans view religion as important, scholars have largely ignored it as a factor in making a significant contribution to personal and national well-being. Most psychologists have treated this aspect of human behavior as non-consequential or as something to avoid.'"[2]

The intent of this paper is to demonstrate how closely connected psychological well-being and spiritual well-being really are, and to outline one particular method for promoting both.

Background

For the past seven years, Jim Birren and I have been teaching a course at USC's Andrus Gerontology Center entitled "Psychological Development through Autobiography."[3] About three years ago, a very large Presbyterian church in Los Angeles asked me if I could teach a religious version of the course in their adult education program. Being a graduate student in USC's School of Religion, I was delighted at the opportunity to re-develop the course with a focus on spiritual development, moral development, human values, and the meaning of life. I had long felt that religion plays a central role in the development

of people's lives and in the formation of their personalities -- offering this course in the context of a religious institution gave me the opportunity to explore this notion. The new class was entitled "Telling Your Story, Exploring Your Faith: Autobiography for Personal Insight and Spiritual Growth."

On the first day of class, I asked the 45 students who showed up to fill our 3x5 cards and give me a little information about themselves: name, age, occupation, educational level, and one sentence about why they had signed up for this class. A selection of their responses: "I am in the process of climbing out of a deep hole, and I feel this class will be the final push out." "I want to look under the carpet at hidden meanings." "I want to write my autobiography because of my present growing reunion with Christ. I hope the discoveries about myself can strengthen my faith." "How to use autobiography for understanding and guidance." "To be able to express myself and to understand myself (spiritually) in written form." "Clarify my thinking in relation to God, self, and others." "I'm in the class because I want to get more comfortable with my past, with memories of my parents, etc." "To better understand ME."

Based on these comments, I felt encouraged that I was on the right track in my exploration of spiritual development and spiritual well-being through life histories.

Structure and Content

The class I developed for this church, which I have subsequently offered in a number of L.A. area churches, has three components: lectures, writing assignments, and small group discussions. I have

also given all-day or half-day workshops on a one-shot basis where I alter the format to deal with time constraints, but most often the class is taught over a period of weeks -- anywhere from six to fifteen weeks.

The lecture portion of the class usually runs 45 minutes to an hour. My overall purpose is to give participants some concepts, ideas, and tools to use in their spiritual and psychological quests. I bring in various theories of life-span developmental psychology, as well as theories of moral development and faith development. I expand on Butler's notion of life review to demonstrate how a life review can be beneficial and appropriate at any age. I discuss various concepts of the self and encourage participants to examine their own notions of the elusive "self." There is always a lively discussion of the prospects for personal change, as they examine their options for the future. And I spend some time talking about personal integration, personality development, fulfillment, self-acceptance, insight, wisdom, reconciliation, and most importantly, the meaning of life experiences.

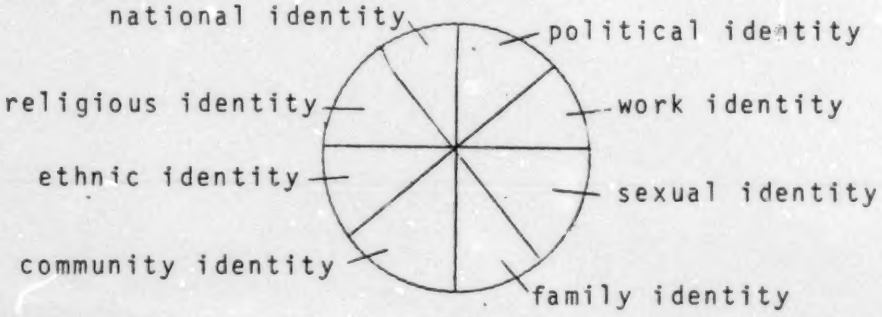
Each week the participants have a writing assignment, which I stress is very important to the process of spiritual growth. These assignments cover the various "themes" of life -- ie, family history, health and body image, history of your life work, the role of money in your life, your experiences with death, the history of your sexual development, moral development, etc. One particular assignment I tried this year for the first time was about "the role of food in your life." The results were very gratifying -- they wrote not only about their personal relationships with food, but also the symbolism of food, food for holy-days, the ethics of food, food and power,

food and love, food and sex, comfort food, etc.

I sometimes vary the assignments according to the characteristics of the group participants. I deliberately do not have an assignment on one's spiritual or faith development because I see spiritual development as an intimate part of all the other aspects of life. The idea is to explore the role of religion and personal faith in all aspects of life -- not to treat religion as something separate from life. The written and verbal responses from my classes confirm that this is the correct view of the role of faith in a religious person's life.

Eugene Bleecker, a therapist who also spoke at the American Psychological Association meetings confirms this idea: "It is very important that people integrate their solutions to life issues and problems they're facing with their own spiritual beliefs. If they try to solve these problems apart from their spiritual beliefs, the solution is not going to have any lasting effect."[4]

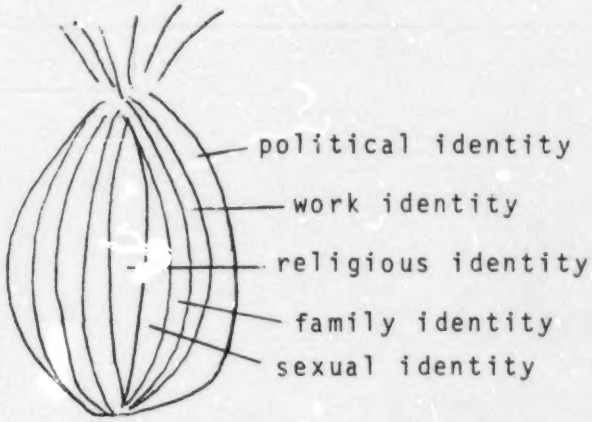
Another way of looking at it is to take a visual approach:



If you think of your identity or your self as a pie with a number of pieces or segments, then you could label each part as some aspect of your total identity. You have a sexual identity, a political identity, a work identity, a family identity, a religious identity, and so on. Your religious identity is simply one segment

of your total identity, along with all the other segments.

If however, you think of your identity using the metaphor of an onion with many layers, it would look something like this:



In this case, each layer of your identity is formed on top of other layers of identity, with your religious identity being at the core, forming the foundation for all those other layers.

Without exception, the people in my classes have seen the latter configuration as a more accurate portrayal of the role of religion in their lives.

The writing assignments are done outside of class and are brought in each week for discussion in the small groups. One page of sensitizing questions on each theme helps participants in the writing process -- stimulating old memories, promoting new insights, establishing connections between present and past. These questions are especially helpful in providing fresh perspectives on old events. There are numerous questions concerning how religious convictions have played a part in shaping attitudes, how faith has grown and changed over the years, and how God has revealed Himself to individuals in their life experiences. Individuals come away from these assignments with renewed consciousness of their relationship with God.

The small groups meet for 15-30 minutes at the end of every class. Each group contains 3-4 members, each of whom shares briefly the insights they gained from the week's assignment. This is often the most fun part of the process for many people. They enjoy hearing the life stories of others. They often report feeling inspired, encouraged, and heartened by this sharing of life experiences. They empathize; they feel concerned; they feel close to each other in this sharing process.

There is often the aspect of witnessing to God's work in their lives -- sometimes even an element of confession. There is certainly always the feeling of community -- a community of believers. There is a wide range of individual differences in terms of piety, spirituality, and especially biblical interpretation, but there is the common underlying element of belief in God and a desire to be closer to Him.

People who enroll in a life history class are quite ready to reveal themselves in intimate detail, both in their writings and in the small groups. After one particular session, I had a middle-aged man tell me: "You see my friend Joe here? He and I have been neighbors for three years; we attend the same church and belong to the same Bible study group. But I learned more about him in the last 15 minutes than I did in the past three years!" Many other comments such as this indicate that this life history process helps promote closeness to other people as well as closeness to God.

Special Techniques

In addition to the sensitizing questions which I hand out each week, there are several other exercises which I use to enhance

spiritual growth and well-being. For one assignment, I ask participants to complete the statement, "I never told anyone ....." This is not an exercise they share in class -- it is done in privacy. I urge them to write out the statement for their own benefit. Then, if they feel strong, they can share this secret with someone else -- perhaps a person who might be concerned with this secret, if the person is available. And finally, I urge them to tell God -- to tell God this thing it is that they've never told anyone.

This exercise has several results. It makes people think very seriously about how much of their private selves they reveal to other people. They remember all their close friends and confidantes and consider the secrets they shared. As they search for the incident to complete the phrase "I never told anyone ...," they often confront something which they feel is shameful or hurtful -- it is usually something bad which they've never felt comfortable in admitting. In the process of remembering this incident and confronting themselves with it, they are acknowledging and accepting the incident. If they share it with another person, they often experience feelings of closeness to that person as a result of revealing some shortcoming, weakness or failure. And when they share with God, there is an intensified feeling of closeness as a result. Sharing an intimate secret, one which has been long-held, can have a powerful bonding effect between people and an enhanced feeling of closeness to God. Participants have reported very powerful experiences of strengthening relationships with parents, spouses, friends and children through this process. They also report qualitative improvements in their prayer activities and spiritual lives.

Another technique I use is one involving metaphor. I ask students to describe their lives as a river: some rivers are slow and meandering -- others are turbulent and fast-moving. Each individual traces the course of his or her own river -- the tributary sources that fed into it, the directions it has taken, the various currents that are evident. I talk about the role of God both in creating the river and determining its course. I ask about boulders or other obstacles that God may have put in the path of their river and what effect these have had. I talk about the river as a source of life -- what people have we nourished with our life-giving waters during the course of our lives?

The river and other metaphors from the natural world are especially evocative in a spiritual sense. The mystery of Creation and the beauty of life are in evidence everywhere -- the ocean, the trees, blue skies as well as storms, birds, animals, rock formations, beautiful meadows, painted deserts. People can use the river metaphor as well as many others to explore the relationship between themselves and the transcendant.

Probably the most important technique I use is the weekly page of sensitizing questions I give to participants to stimulate them in their writings. I design the questions specifically to elicit the spiritual dimensions to every aspect of life -- family, career, sex, health, money, moral development, etc.

Some examples: Do you feel that you have a calling to be in the particular occupation you're in? How do your religious convictions influence the way you treat your body? How do you find meaning in illness, suffering, and death? Are comforted by the notion of a life

hereafter, or does it worry you? How does your faith affect the way you deal with money? Can you give some examples of how you've seen God at work in your life? Have you ever had a crisis of faith, a spiritual crisis? How did you deal with it? What was the outcome? Do you share your faith with other people? Why or why not? Can you be a moral person without being a religious person? Can you be a religious person without being a moral person?

The ultimate goal of these questions and all the other exercises is to help people to tell their stories and to explore their faith -- to see their faith at work and to recognize the spiritual dimensions to every aspect of life. I do not attempt to give people my answers to their spiritual questions. Rather, I help them to find their own answers, in their own words, in their own lives.

Benefits

The comments of participants upon completion of the life history class indicate a significant degree of success in achieving the goal of enhanced personal insight and spiritual well-being:

"Spiritually moved me. Motivated me to sign up for a Silent Retreat. Stimulated further growth." "Learned much about self." "Presentation was personal, motivating, and educational. A growing experience." "Great class. Able to identify and appreciate things from the past." "The class satisfied all the high hopes I had for it in the beginning." "Thank you! Saved my life. Gave me richness, insights, meaning, joy, self-esteem."

The written exercises are often cathartic for many individuals. They are able to work through unresolved conflicts from earlier times, and to deal with old feelings about guilt, anger, remorse, insecurity,

and self-doubt. Some people have been carrying around heavy burdens of emotional baggage for years -- the self-reflective writing process can often help them to let go of this baggage once and for all.

The classes enhance spiritual well-being through increasing participants' awareness of themselves and the pervasiveness of their relationship with God. They come to see the Divine aspects of their lives as never before. Their self-esteem is bolstered and their faith is renewed.

Probably the best word I can use to sum up the total effect of the life history exercise is reconciliation -- reconcilation to the past, reconcilation to others (often even others who have already died), reconciliation to the self (accepting the previously unacceptable), and reconciliation to God.

Adaptations and Other Uses of the Life History Technique

While I have taught my classes only to Protestant Christian groups, the technique is by no means limited to that religious tradition. With some modifications of concepts and terminology, the technique could be easily adapted to Catholic, Jewish groups, or other religions. Since I have not personally worked with these other faiths, I cannot attest to the effectiveness of life histories in enhancing spiritual well-being, but I suspect the results would be similar.

The life history technique as I have outlined it here is very effective with older persons, but is certainly not limited to any age group. My own students range in age from 20 to 80. About half of them are in their 40's and 50's, with some older people and some

younger. The class seems to have special appeal to people who are going through transitions -- children leaving home, career changes, divorces, mid-life transitions, retirement, etc. -- which are often accompanied by feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, insecurity, and confusion. People search for spiritual anchors during such times, something which can provide deep security, reassurance and peace of mind.

People also go through periods of questioning or reevaluating their religious beliefs during their lives. A life history exercise such as this can be the perfect thing for such people having struggles with their faith. Sometimes people simply feel that their spiritual lives are stale and in need of refreshing and renewal. A focused activity of life history writing can provide such a tonic.

"Telling Your Story, Exploring Your Faith" can be adapted for use in small groups in churches, in new member classes, in confirmation classes, and in personal development or Christian psychology classes.

I have given training sessions to counseling staffs at various churches, and have had a number of priests and pastors take my class to learn the technique to use in their pastoral counseling. Used on an individual or small group basis, life histories can be an effective therapeutic tool for use with people having crises of faith or problems coping with life transitions.

The technique can provide wonderful entertainment as well as enrichment in senior centers and in retirement homes. Elements could also be adapted to interview older people and do oral histories with those who cannot write due to blindness or other incapacities. Several of my former students are using the technique in such a way.

Conclusion

The common notion of all these adaptations is that it is possible to enhance both psychological and spiritual well-being through specially designed life history techniques. Participants gain deeper levels of insight into their personal development, they grasp the significance of life events, and they strengthen and enrich their religious faith.

REFERENCES

[1] John Dart, "Religious Psychologists Upbeat," article in the "Los Angeles Times," September 3, 1983.

[2] Ibid.

[3] For further details concerning "Psychological Development Through Autobiography," see "Guided Autobiography: An Approach to Human Development," by B.J. Hateley, presented at the 1982 Gerontological Society of America meeting in Boston.

[4] John Dart, Op. Cit.